

The Days of the Dolphin

Before Gualala Arts had the present Arts Center, even before the organization was housed in the hanger at the airport on the ridge, the present location of the Dolphin Gift Shop and Gallery behind the Post Office was its home. In the early eighties the room that is now the gallery was the all-purpose meeting room. The niche just west of the sales desk was the library. But the rest of the space, then and now, was given to the consignment sales of the works of local artists and crafts persons.

For events, such as Art in the Redwoods or the presentation of plays, the Community Center was rented or borrowed. There was no newsletter. There was no need for one as everyone knew everyone else's business. Anyhow there was a bulletin board with signs hand lettered and photo copied in Santa Rosa.

These were the days before Karel Metcalf. Then the board was mostly made of the volunteers who staffed the Dolphin and steered it through multiple growing pains. There were months when participation sank so drastically, it seemed the organization would soon shudder and breathe its last.

It didn't. The shock of thinking this vital part of the community was going to disappear would inspire someone, often a new-comer to donate more time, bring new enthusiasm, or make a cash contribution, and another crisis was averted.

Through it all, there was the Dolphin, steadily and calmly, taking the bumps, but being the outlet for the sale of the artwork. It is extremely comforting to see how it is still the centerpiece for Gualala Arts' downtown presence. Very often it is the portal for tourists and new residents to find the Arts Center. In fact, now it is the location of the town's tourist information center.

With the meeting room made into a gallery, the Dolphin's exhibits have complimented and doubled the scope of exhibit possibilities for artists from here and the Bay Area. For many years, there has been one show a year that anyone could enter – the Holiday Boutique. In the years before political correctness, the show had another name.

The Dolphin, then with a crew of faithful volunteers, and now under the management of Helen Klembeck, was an opportunity to bring art to the public. Thousands of gifts have flowed out of this building into the hands, homes, and hearts of persons scattered across the face of the planet.

Stop by the Dolphin some day and allow yourself the time and pleasure of browsing among its many attractions. The shop is open every day of the week from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friendly staff persons will gladly ring up your sale of that special item you picked out, help you buy raffle tickets, inform you of the latest cultural events, and even, if you are lucky, the latest news of the community such as whether the mouth of the Gualala River has opened yet or not.

A Huge Thank You to Ralph Schwartz

Behind an unassuming mid-Western facade, Ralph Schwartz, retiring docent at The Dolphin and Gualala Arts, has a love of music, and a passion to serve others. His story is an adventure that includes surviving the Great Depression and fighting in World War II. Eventually, he settled on the shores of the Pacific in Gualala.

While touring along the coast in 1989, Ralph and his wife Grace met another guest at their Bodega Bay lodging who told them about the South Coast. They looked and shortly thereafter left their hometown of Fort Wayne, Indiana. They bought a home in Sea Ranch, and found jobs at Jay Baker's for Grace and at the recycling center for Ralph.

Shortly thereafter, the pair started volunteering at The Dolphin, a relationship that lasted for the next sixteen years. Ralph was guest of honor at the Dolphin on October 3, a tribute to his faithful Sunday morning stint at the store, often followed in the last few years by a shift at the Gualala Arts Center.

Schwartz loved meeting the public from all over the world – from Tasmania to Iceland. The job suited his extensive experience in retail sales and his personal, understated charm. He praises Helen Klembeck, whom he calls "The Canary," a reference to her career as vocalist for George Liberace. Both share a love of music.

Ralph claims he took up music in the womb. His addiction to drumming stems from his childhood fascination with the drummers in the Sunday band concerts in Indiana. In high school Schwartz joined the Fort Wayne Civic Symphony as a percussionist – a volunteer position that lasted over forty years.

Then, World War II came. Ralph volunteered again, this time for the Air Cadet program. He already had a pilot's license, but he ended up as a navigator on a B-26. After guiding the plane from Savannah, Georgia to North Africa via the northern circle route, he flew a total of 62 missions in North Africa. On a fateful 40th mission he was wounded by stray flak and volunteered to rejoin his crew until he eventually ended up in Sardinia.

After the war, he returned to the furniture business, specializing in baby furniture and clothing. He was instrumental in founding an association of independent nursery furniture retailers with 100 members and a trade magazine. Baby furniture proved useful at home where he and Grace raised three sons and a daughter.

Ralph also has volunteered as secretary for the Lions Club and Point Arena Mason Blue Lodge, both for nine years. He even helped lay flooring in Coleman Auditorium and helped wire the arts center building.

Reflecting on his experiences, Ralph counts himself a fortunate person who has had a led a full life and can modestly boast, "I'm a pretty good drummer." He is also a very special person whose dedication to serving others has enriched a lot of lives around the globe.

